

“Obviously the cool group wear designer things.”

A Social Practice Theory Perspective on Children’s Consumption

“I eat my peas with honey,
I’ve done it all my life.
It makes the peas taste funny,
But it keeps them on the knife.”

If you find this anonymous children’s poem funny, it is because you have implicitly understood since childhood that one does not eat from a knife but from a fork. If you learnt to eat using chopsticks then the humour is lost – you do not understand the social practice. From birth, children absorb and rehearse, with little conscious or critical thought, a great many social practices such as using a toilet, eating in company and engaging with the commercial world. The form varies across cultures, but the existence of social practice to order human action is consistent; “there is nowhere to go outside the world of practice” (Shove *et al.*, 2012, p.126). Practices are the stuff of the routinized, automatic everyday tasks that we all perform. The right way of doing them is ‘obvious’ to the regular performers, and alien to outsiders. It is our contention that we can gain new and illuminating insights by viewing children’s consumption as a social practice that is as automated and routinized as eating with a knife and fork.

Our paper firstly briefly reviews the theoretical lenses through which children’s consumption has been examined over the past 15 years. Secondly we present the key characteristics of social practice theories and then the - thus far rather limited - ways in which they have been applied to consumption. Thirdly we outline what we believe these theories have to offer the study of children’s consumption. Fourthly we present the findings of a study using a Social Practice Theory (SPT) framework to analyse qualitative discussions about the acquisition and use of consumer goods with 58 UK children aged 8-13. Finally we discuss the theoretical and methodological implications of applying a Social Practice Theory perspective to children’s consumption and propose a future research agenda to bolster this new and promising field.

Theoretical Approaches to Children’s Consumption

The marketing literature relating to children’s consumption has been and continues to be dominated by ‘consumer socialisation’ research (John, 1999) that is heavily underpinned by cognitive, developmental psychology and that aims principally to understand how individual children accrue - across predictable ‘age-stages’ (Piaget, 1960) - an increasing level of sophistication in interpreting

marketing messages and operating competently and autonomously within the market place (*e.g.* John, 1999; Oates *et al.*, 2001; Chaplin and John, 2007). John's (1999) 25 year review continues to be a landmark reference and contemporary work on core socialisation themes such as childhood materialism (*e.g.* Buijzen and Valkenburg, 2003; Oprea *et al.*, 2012) and advertising literacy (*e.g.* Livingstone and Helsper, 2006; Rozendaal *et al.*, 2010) are still firmly fixed within the cognitive psychology paradigm. Such research has also investigated the effects on children's behaviour of various 'socialisation agents' such as parents (*e.g.* Flouri, 1999), peers (*e.g.* Banerjee and Dittmar, 2008) and the media (Buijzen and Valkenburg, 2003; Twenge and Kasser, 2013). This paradigmatic lens privileges a view of consumption as a force exerted by marketers on individual children and has tended to focus public debate on definitions of 'fair' marketing and specifically on pinpointing the age at which children are cognitively and socially capable of being 'savvy' and thus no longer 'vulnerable' to undue external commercial pressures (Cross, 2004; Langer, 2004). The language used by governments manifests the embeddedness of this mode of thinking about childhood consumption. For example the use of the word "impact" in the title of a UK government-commissioned review "The Impact of the Commercial World on Children's Wellbeing" (DCSF/DCMS, 2009) reinforces the received view that the system that provides consumption objects is external to and separate from the world of children and somehow collides with small individuals.

This research focus on the 'solitary subject' (Ritson and Elliott, 1999, p.260) has been challenged by a number of authors. Nairn *et al.* (2008) proposed an interpretation of children's consumption as more culturally constituted and used Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) to illuminate some of the complex social roles played by brand symbols in children's everyday lives, such as how toys are used to reinforce gender positions and how the notion of "cool" is highly contested terrain in primary schools, whilst Gaya Wickes *et al.* (2009) showed how 7-11 year olds used commodified celebrities as resources to discuss and debate moral issues. Ritson and Elliott's (1999) ethnographic study turned to Uses and Gratifications Theory (O'Donohoe, 1994) in conjunction with Reader Response Theory to analyse the social use of adverts by adolescents in the natural setting of the sixth form common room. They found that adverts and the text embedded within them were used both individually by young people to gain group access, to fit in and to negotiate a place in the social hierarchy, and collectively to establish group rituals and metaphors. In this view the focus shifts from powerful consumption forces to groups of agentic children using the objects supplied by the market place to skilfully navigate social situations.

Away from the marketing literature, sociologists began to look at children's consumption during the 1990s. This research has been dominated by a 'production of consumption' perspective

(Featherstone, 1990) which foregrounds the marketplace offerings that children consume (Martens *et al.*, 2004). Media (Alexander, 1994; Buckingham and Willett, 2006) and toys (Best, 1998; Cross, 1998) have received most attention. 'Production of consumption' research can lead to a focus on physical, emotional or moral dangers from consumption, such as the literature considering unhealthy food marketing to children (*e.g.* Montgomery and Chester, 2009) or the narrow sexual stereotyping of toys such as Barbie (Rogers, 1999), but sociological perspectives have also produced a rich stream of research investigating the symbolic meanings of consumption (Baudrillard, 1998) particularly in relation to identity formation. Examples relating to young people's use of clothes include Marion and Nairn's (2011) exploration of French teenage girls' fashion tactics in building narrative identities Croghan *et al.*'s (2006) discussion of 'style failure' amongst UK teens or Elliott and Leonard's (2004) study of the important signalling role of the 'right brand' of trainers amongst low income young people.

However, as Martens *et al.* (2004, p.161) pointed out ten years ago "relatively little is known about how children engage in *practices* of consumption or what the significance of this is to their everyday lives" (our italics). This remains true today although as we shall see below the application of SPT to the field of adult consumption is beginning to gain momentum (Warde, 2005; Halkier and Jensen, 2011; Halkier *et al.*, 2011; Martens, 2012).

Social Practice Theories

Social Practice Theories are grounded in the thinking of sociologists such as Bourdieu (1977, 1990), Giddens (1984, 1991) and Taylor (1971) and have been reinvigorated by German sociologist Andreas Reckwitz (2002) and American philosopher Ted Schatzki (1996; 2002). According to Halkier *et al.*'s (2011, p.3) definition in their introduction to a special issue on applying social practice to consumption, "practice theories are a set of cultural and philosophical accounts that focus on the conditions surrounding the practical carrying out of social life." SPT is different from the 'consumer socialisation', 'CCT', 'uses and gratifications' and 'production of consumption' approaches to child consumption described above in that the research spotlight is directed away from the individual child, the marketplace and even the child's social and cultural milieu, and shone instead on the reproduction of practices. In line with Giddens' theory of structuration (1984, p.2) what is being studied is "neither the experience of the individual actor, nor the existence of any form of social totality, but the social practices ordered across space and time." As he goes on to say, "Human social activities... are recursive. That is to say, they are not brought into being by social actors but continually recreated by them via the very means whereby they express themselves in mundane everyday life."

The notion of practices being 'ordered' or organised is particularly important and Schatzki builds on Giddens' theory (1996, p.89) in defining a practice as "an "organised nexus of actions." He sees actions as organised or linked in three major ways: "(1) through understandings, for example, of what to say and do; (2) through explicit rules, principles, precepts and instructions; and (3) through what I will call "teleoaffective" structures embracing ends, projects, tasks, purposes, beliefs, emotions and moods."

Social practice theories and consumption

Warde (2005) was arguably the first to specifically apply practice theories to the domain of consumption. As a sociologist his understanding of consumption includes the use of marketplace objects (Featherstone, 1990) as well as an understanding of their symbolic significance (Baudrillard, 1998). He thus defines consumption as "a process whereby agents engage in appropriation and appreciation, whether for utilitarian, expressive, or contemplative purposes, of goods, services, performances, information or ambience, whether purchased or not, over which the agent has some degree of discretion" (p.137). Since 2005 research taking a social practice perspective on consumption has focused largely on practices that produce over-consumption and as such has been part of policy-driven agenda on issues such as environment, sustainability and taking exercise (*e.g.* Shove and Pantzar, 2009; Røpke, 2009; Shove, 2010; Hargreaves, 2011) and has become an important part in government debate over behaviour change (Shove *et al*, 2009; Chatterton and Anderson, 2011). Within the marketing academy practice theory has also been used in an eclectic set of other terrains such as understanding green consumers (Connolly and Prothero, 2008), analysing the practice of DIY (Watson and Shove, 2008) and in relation to resource theory (Arnould, 2008). However, these studies are scarce and none have applied practice theory to the study of children's consumption. It is this gap that our paper aims to address.

Social practice theories and children's consumption

Warde (2005) maintains that consumption is not a practice in and of itself but that most practices "require and entail consumption" (p.137). Whilst not arguing with his definition of consumption (see above) we hypothesise that for children consumption is, indeed, a practice in the sense of Schatzki's (1996) 'nexus of actions' that are organised around implicit understandings, explicit rules, and teleoaffective structures. Childhood is above all a time when humans learn. Beyond formal learning in an educational setting much of children's everyday life revolves around the implicit learning and reproduction of a host of (often very complex) social practices that allow them to function smoothly within society. We hypothesise that consumption is no exception and that children's "appropriation

and appreciation ... of goods, services, performances..." (Warde, 2005, p.137) can be conceived of as a social practice and as "recurrent and non-reflexive behaviour" (Southerton, 2013).

Practices consist of interrelating and inter-reliant elements described in rather general terms by Reckwitz (2002, p.149) in his seminal overview paper as "bodily and mental activities, 'things' and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge". However, as we might expect with a theory that is rapidly finding new applications, there is debate regarding its operationalization and particularly in relation to which elements should be included in defining and analysing a practice. As noted above, Schatzki (1996) refers to 'understandings,' 'rules' and 'teleoaffective structures', an approach followed by Martens (2012), whereas Warde (2005) talks of "understandings, procedures and engagements"; a version that has been applied to consumption research by Halkier and Jensen (2011). Meanwhile Shove *et al.* (2012) point to the importance of objects for social practice (such as knives and forks in our example in the introduction); something Reckwitz (2002) also noted in his original definition. For him, in "practice theory, objects are necessary components" (p.256) and indeed Røpke's (2009) review of applied SPT research suggests there is now broad agreement amongst current theorists on including material objects. Given this recent trend we decided to frame our investigation using Shove *et al.*'s (2012) structure of three elements; 'materials', 'competences' and 'meanings'. 'Competences' encompass Schatzki's 'understandings' as well as 'rules' and represents 'multiple forms of understanding and knowledgeability (Shove *et al.*, 2012, p.23); 'meanings' includes 'teleoeffective structures' and represents more broadly 'the social and symbolic significance' (p.24) of a practice. Figure 1 shows our conceptualisation of the structure of the practice of children's consumption. Following Shove *et al.* (2012) we assign great importance to the links between these 3 elements as the structure of a practice depends primarily on specific combinations of materials, meanings and competences.

Figure 1: The Structure of a Social Practice

Methodology

Empirical research into a social practice presents a number of methodological issues given that the aim is to shed light on an invisible set of structures beyond the view of the interviewee (Halkier and Jensen, 2011; Martens, 2012). Yet rather surprisingly serious consideration of the analytical translation of SPT into empirical research is extremely recent and there is thus little previous empirical work on which to draw. In her study of dishwashing, Marten's (2012) placed 24/7 CCTV cameras in her participants' kitchens to record the activity of the practice. In our case this was

neither possible nor desirable given the diverse locations of consumption practice and sensitive ethical considerations involved in videoing young people. However, Martens (2012) also suggests using qualitative interviews on the grounds that the “discursive interaction between researchers and research participants” (p.1) presents an appropriate way of exploring the structure of linkages between the elements of a practice. Taking the view that children are, in Reckwitz’s words (2002) “carriers” of the practice (p.256) and a ‘crossing point’ between various practices rather than the focus of the research, an analysis of their talk on the subject of consumption was considered likely to reveal whether or not there are consistent combinations of consumption materials, shared meanings associated with them and a discrete set of understandings, skills and goals that together might constitute a practice of consumption.

The qualitative interview data were collected as part of a project for UNICEF UK exploring the links between materialism, well-being and inequality in 8-13 year olds across the UK, Spain and Sweden. Over 200 children were interviewed in total, although our analysis is limited to data from the UK sample (n=58), to obviate national consumption practice differences diluting our insights into underlying structures. Thus our sample is drawn from six schools across England, Scotland and Northern Ireland selected to represent a wide socio-economic spectrum in an attempt to control for differences by income. The age-range reflects Piaget’s (1960) important ‘concrete operational stage’ before children develop adult-like cognitive competence. In four schools, two group discussions were held, and in the remaining two schools one group discussion was supplemented with two depth interviews with rather isolated children who the teachers had identified as likely to respond better in a one-to-one context. All bar two of the groups was mixed gender; these two being with girls only.

The topic guide was designed to allow children to express themselves freely on issues related to consumer goods, wellbeing and inequality and the resulting data offered a good opportunity to access the structure of the children’s consumption practice. This would not have been possible had researchers limited their questions to the ‘elements’ of Social Practice Theory. Each interviewer followed the same discussion guide (see Appendix 1) which took children through six topics and activities. Children were first of all asked to talk about ‘what makes a good/bad day’ before completing a drawing exercise to capture their feelings about this. They were then asked to explain to a stranger about different groups in their school and how they thought it felt to belong to each group. Attention was then switched to life outside school and their activities and relationships. Following this they were given two scenarios. The first presented a child with lots of money and ‘cool stuff’ but little time with his/her parents and the second described a child with very few cool things

and little money but lots of time with his/her family. The children were encouraged to discuss which child was happier and why. Following this they were asked to talk about the things they would really like to have, what is 'in' at the moment, how it feels to get new stuff and people they know who 'get everything they want'. If time, the children then carried out a paired role playing exercise where one played a child who wanted to get their parents to buy them something and the other played the parent trying to resist. From this they discussed the techniques they had used to get things they knew their parents didn't really want to buy them.

Where children consented, discussions were audio-recorded and these were subsequently transcribed. In total transcriptions from 9 in-school group discussions and 4 interviews with 58 individuals were available for analysis, amounting to around 80,000 words.

Analysis

In order to follow an inductive approach, *i.e.* to generate theoretical insights from the data, a standardized process of thematic analysis was used (Braun and Clarke, 2012) to mine the data as deeply as possible. The transcripts were first searched for emergent codes, which were labeled as nodes in NVIVO. Once the number of these nodes expanded and analysis had progressed, key nodes they were grouped into three main umbrella themes, corresponding to the three SPT elements of competence, meaning and materials. Once these umbrella themes had been described, analysis continued and sub-themes with both latent and semantic characteristics were expanded and linked across a further two layers to identify examples of specific inter-related phenomena. For example, within the umbrella theme of 'competence', the sub-node of 'social consumption performance' was developed, and within that there was further segregation of data into 'negative perception of being spoilt' and 'product knowledge'. A total of 372 passages were coded, including 184 within the three umbrella themes central to our SPT analysis. Within the 'meaning' umbrella theme there were 119 coded passages, in the 'material' theme there were 35 passages and in the 'competence' theme there were 30.

This clearly visualized thematic analysis allowed the researchers to easily access the data from multiple entry-points and also discuss the significance of the various themes in the light of the existing literature and the SPT theoretical framework. NVIVO also allowed the researchers to share annotations on particular passages in the data, and enabled them to discuss the thematic map as it developed to ensure researcher agreement had been reached.

In addition to this coding, word search queries were used to identify instances when keywords, such as 'cool', 'obvious' and 'popular' were mentioned by the children. These instances were then re-read

and analysed for their context and significance with regards to consumption. Word counts were also run to establish a picture of the language most commonly used by the children.

As with all qualitative research, findings are not intended to be generalizable. Rather, the following insights demonstrate the potential contribution of Social Practice Theory to the children's consumption research field.

Findings

Our aim was to discover, through analysing the children's talk, how the structure of the social practice of consumption manifests itself in their everyday lives. We thus sought to identify what Reckwitz (2002) calls 'blocks' of interconnected elements which, as shown in figure 1, we have chosen to label as materials, meanings and competences (Shove *et al.*, 2012) and which exist "not just in the minds of actors but are out there in the practice... [itself]" (Taylor, 1971, p.27).

A wide range of consumption materials emerged from all parts of the discussions but it quickly became apparent that these could be succinctly and easily classified into one of just five categories that were repeatedly and consistently cited by children across all groups. Technological items including laptops, games consoles and mobile phones as well as pets permeated all discussions; clothes appeared with particular frequency in the discourse of older girls; and collectibles such as Dr Who paraphernalia emerged in younger children's talk. Brands were also treated as having material form as they were linguistically represented by the children as uncountable nouns as in "Do you have *any* Hollister or *any* Abercrombie?" (School 7 Group 12, 11/12 yrs) (our italics), where the use of the word "any" underscores the unimportance of the product relative to the brand badge itself. The acquisition and deployment of this extremely narrow range of goods already suggests that children's consumption is a discrete, bounded, standardised practice in its own right that cannot easily be reconciled with Warde's (2005) description of consumption as a support act, or "moment" in other practices (p.137). For the purposes of this paper we will concentrate on the most commonly cited materials: technology, clothes and brands.

The meaning *i.e.* "social and symbolic significance" (Shove *et al.*, 2002, p.23) of these particular objects could also be reduced to a small, consistent set; product functionality such as using a phone to call home; reinforcing an emotional bond for example through gift giving and receiving; compensating for a broken emotional bond, such as wanting a pet to avoid feeling lonely; and finally associations between consumption and social position in the peer hierarchy. This latter meaning was undoubtedly the strongest. Particular consoles, types of clothes and brands were associated, in conjunction with communally recognisable competences with particular social positions. For

example, as we will see, a social group called “the populars” or “the cool group” feature consistently in children’s discourse and their particular social position is uniformly and unambiguously associated with “designer” brands.

JESS: In a way, I have to admit, some people, *obviously*, in the cool group, they wear designer things... (School 4 Group 8, 10/11yrs – our italics)

For all the children the link between this group and those materials is, as Jess notes, “obvious.” This particular meaning was also clearly associated with a number of competences to which we now turn.

As explained above we take competences to mean “multiple forms of understandings and knowledgeability” (Shove *et al.*, 2002, p.23) which includes Schatzki’s (1996, p.89) “understandings, for example, of what to say and do” as well as his “rules” and “principles.” We identified in the data three discrete but interrelated sets of competences related to social position that we have termed “social consumption recognition”, “social consumption performance” and “social consumption communication.” We have structured the rest of our analysis around these competences and show how they combine simultaneously with technology, clothes and brand and notions of peer hierarchy to form a clearly identifiable social practice of children’s consumption (see figure 2).

Figure 2: Children’s Social Practice of Consumption related to peer hierarchy

Social consumption recognition

Children recognise a structured social hierarchy regardless of their views about – or satisfaction with it. As Mikey explains to the interviewer:

MIKEY: Everybody wants to be on top, like, popular. Nearly everybody.
Everybody wants to be ...like, the people that hang out with the best people. Coolest people. So everybody looks up to them. But ... it doesn’t actually matter (School 6 Group 11, 12/13 yrs).

Mikey uses “everybody” four times in this short passage revealing communal belief in the existence of a social reality where being “on top” is desirable and also synonymous with “cool” and “best”.

Mikey’s words also reveal that attitudes to this social hierarchy are not uniform. His use of “nearly” acknowledges that children are not all compelled to desire popularity and his final statement that “it doesn’t actually matter,” shows that he personally does not want to sign up to its values. Yet the *existence* of the hierarchy is not up for debate and, importantly for our identification of a social practice, the existence of the link between popularity and certain materials is also undisputed. The ability to recognise this link constitutes the competence that we have called “social consumption

recognition". The following passage shows the meticulous specificity of the recognised rules governing dressing for popularity:

- I: Okay, but you're saying the popular group are...
- LISA: Sometimes people will come to a sporty event in Uggs and they'll be wearing jeggings and stuff...
- SIAN: Sometimes they wear really impractical things...
- LISA: Just to show how...high...
- I: This is out of school?
- HENRY: In a field, they could wear a Ralph Lauren thing for no reason, just to look brilliant...
- ERIN: If it was a non-uniform day, and instead of just wearing casual clothes they'd just come in wearing their designer outfits...
- LISA: They come in wearing necklaces with gold...
- I: And what brands do they wear?
- LISA: Wills, Hollister...Definitely Hollister
- HENRY: Abercrombie and Fitch...
- JO: And when they buy the brands they don't buy them for the quality they buy them for the lettering, that says Hollister or Abercrombie and Fitch...
- SIAN: Then people look at them and they...
- LISA: Judge them...
- SIAN: ...label them...they label them as rich or popular... (School 7 Group 12, 11/12yrs)

The group communally recognise Uggs, Wills, Hollister, Abercrombie and Fitch and Ralph Lauren as brands that show "how high" you are. Sian's use of "people" implies a general understanding of a peer group code whereby these brands act as a 'label' that denotes specific attributes of "rich or popular". Here we also see an undercurrent of shared understanding that ran through all discourses – the associations between "popular" and "rich" which illustrates the sense that carriers of the practice also carry an innate understanding about its constitutive rules and procedures. We are reminded of Reckwitz's definition of a practice as "a routinized way in which ... the world is understood" (2002, p.250).

We get a sense that the children do not like the 'populars' and seek ways of undermining them for example by criticising them for being "impractical" in wearing unsuitable clothes for a muddy sports

field “for no reason” and for buying on image rather than “quality”. Yet whether or not the ‘populars’ are liked or disliked the social practice of consumption remains and the children carry it and reinforce it through their recognition of the link between status and brand.

Going back to Mikey’s group, another boy Alex mentions a social group that he recognises as contrasting with the “cool group” and that he refers to as “... the lower stage people”. Just as Sian in the group above associates “popular” with “rich”, the “lower stage people” are seen as “poor” and again this language and labelling demonstrates that children understand the social associations between money, status and particular products. Mikey and Eve explain how this works in relation to phones:

- I: What about kids who don’t have very much money. Can you kind of...tell that, or do you...
- MIKEY: You can tell that. By their phones. All you have to do is look at little hints, basically. If they, like, pull out a phone, go like that, you know, they’re scared to pull out their phone because they don’t want people bullying them or nothing about it.
- I: People get bullied about what phone they’ve got?
- EVE: Yes. Basically bullies ... ‘Oh, your phone’s smaller than mine’ or ‘your phone’s crappier than mine’ (School 6 Group 11, 12/13yrs).

Mikey describes the “little hints” that give away someone’s undesirable place on the social hierarchy. He relates how “you can tell” someone’s social position “by their phone” and also how the owner of these undesirable phones are also painfully aware of their significance, because they are “scared” to pull them out in public.

In Mikey’s talk we also see another implicit understanding about the social hierarchy – that those at the top bully those at the bottom or else dissociate themselves, as another group explained: “so if you’re rich you wouldn’t hang around with the people who are poor” (School 6 Group 10, 10/11yrs).

Clearly there already exists a developed literature on conspicuous consumption amongst adults (*e.g.* Bourdieu, 1984; Willis, 1991; Langer, 2002) and a very much smaller one amongst children (*e.g.* Belk *et al.*, 1982, 1984; Elliot and Leonard, 2004). However, our analysis goes beyond the classical understanding of consumption as a mechanism for achieving social distinction (Bourdieu, 1984). Rather, consumption is entirely bound up in children’s implicit, taken-for-granted understandings of the topography of their social landscape. It is significant, for example, that the children use the present simple tense in most of their accounts of peer behaviour implying automated, repeated

actions; an account of the 'natural order of things'. Coupled both with specific materials and with the competence of social consumption, the result is an embedded and somewhat intractable social practice.

Social consumption performance

However, "knowing in the sense of being able to evaluate a performance", such as recognising the consumption-based hierarchies, "is not the same as knowing in the sense of having the skills to perform" (Shove *et al.*, 2012, p.23), and so we turn to 'social consumption performance'. The data shows that maintaining a place at the top of the social hierarchy and above the "lower stages" requires careful attention to appearance in order to be seen and to stand out. As Anna and Katie told the interviewer:

ANNA: There's a group in L class, that they care about how they smell, they care about how they look...they care about what they wear.... ...they care if they get muddy, they're...

KATIE: Drama queens (School 4, Group 7, 9/10yrs).

And as Jo explained, "There's the popular group, they're sort of obsessed with their appearance..." (School 7 Group 12, 11/12yrs). Similarly, another girl noted that "some [the 'populars'] dress to like... dress so that everyone looks at them. Like, really different" (School 6 Group 10, 10/11yrs), reminding us of Sian and Henry's description above of the 'cool' girls turning up to sporting events in impractical Ugg boots and jeggings just to show off; or being "in a field" wearing "a Ralph Lauren thing for no reason, just to look brilliant..." (School 7 Group 12, 11/12yrs). These accounts suggest that social consumption performance competence for members of the cool group consists of maintaining visibility by being "obsessed by appearance" and attracting and commanding attention by looking "really different" from the others around them.

However, popularity is not the only or, indeed, the most common social objective. As we have seen, the popular children are not universally (or even mostly) liked. In one of the individual interviews Tom described how most of the 'populars' "get there" by having enemies as well as friends (School 7 Depth 3, 12/13yrs). Other children described the 'populars' as "two-faced", "bossy" (School 1 Group 1, 8/9yrs, and as argumentative, rude and "stuck up" (School 7 Group 12, 11/12yrs). Our data also shows other social consumption performances with more positively affirmed consequences. Discussing what groups of people wear on non-uniform daysⁱ, the extract below revolves around how "normal" or "friendly" people like Alex 'perform' compared to both the cool people and another social group that they recognise and label as "the people that want to be cool".

DAISY: Yes, like Alex just wears casual, if you get what I mean...

ALEX: Everyday clothes...because all the cool people when they come in wear different clothes that they would wear on a normal day...

I: So, like they dress up? Is that right?
[several say 'Yes']

ALEX: But then like the friendly people just wear casual clothes like you would on a normal day.
And people that want to be cool are just wearing cool stuff, but they don't go...

DYLAN: It's just like "Ugh, sorry!"

ALEX: "What, where are you wearing that?"

ALEX: It's like a long sleeved t-shirt with shorts on!
[laughter]

DAISY: And flip-flops and socks, ugh, and with sandals! (School 4, Group 8 10/11yrs.)

The rules of the practice proscribe different performances for different positions on the social hierarchy. Indeed, as Shove *et al.* (2012) explain, to fully understand the dynamic of a practice we must consider the "local variations of performance and enactment [that] accumulate and persist" (p.126). Thus wearing "casual" or "normal clothes" is required to be seen as "normal" whereas to be popular demands "dressing up." Beyond this "normal clothes" serve to lubricate peer-to-peer relationships whereas "dressing up" means social elevation and aloofness. As another Alex explained, "I usually hang around with people that like have the same stuff or like the same stuff, so then you get along better" (School 6 Group 11, 11/12yrs) echoing Hartrup's (1999) research showing that consumption can reflect "benign social processes such as the strengthening of friendship". SPT thus offers an additional interpretation of Miles *et al.*'s (1998) seminal analysis of "fitting in and sticking out" (p.81). For these authors the two performances illustrate a "paradox that seems to underlie youth experiences of consumption: the idea that everybody's individual taste somehow transforms itself into communal taste", (p.89). Using a SPT lens we come to see that there are actually two performance scripts that conjoin meaning and materials in a recognised and reproducible way.

The discussion of the "people that want to be cool" also gives insight into what happens if a competence is not mastered. The particular aspect of dressing performance derided by Alex, Dylan and Daisy is wearing unsuitable combinations, in their words things that "don't go" "like a long

sleeved t-shirt with shorts on!” This behaviour attracts both ridicule (laughter) and disgust “ugh”. The children’s drive to avoid ridicule is in line with Wooten’s research, which explored “ridicule as a mechanism through which adolescents learn, sometimes painfully, about consumption practices deemed unacceptable to influential others” (Wooten, 2006, p.188). However, our analysis frames the avoidance of ridicule as a competence necessary for the performance of a social practice rather than as a mechanism for individual socialization.

Selecting the ‘right’ clothes on non-uniform day was not the only social consumption performance competence we encountered in the data. We also observed a pattern whereby children repeatedly attempted to assert their authority over classmates by flaunting their product expertise, often through in depth talk about product features, prices and availability. In this group, at two junctures in the discussion Jake and Alex compete to show their expertise on consoles and video games. To begin with they discuss the scenario of the two fictitious boys Sam and Tom (see methodology).

JAKE: To put this in a nutshell, I think that Sam is a normal kid who’s smart and stuff, and has his mum to help him, and Tom is a spoiled kid who is quite dumb and doesn’t have his parents around to help him, and he plays his PlayStation and he should get an Xbox!

I: [laughs] Oh dear! How come PlayStation is not as good as an Xbox?

JAKE: Well, they’re both quite good, but I’ve always been more of an Xbox fan.

ALEX: But you’ve been saying...you don’t like it when people say that you play on the PS2.

JAKE: Well, PS2 and 360 are both good systems, but...I’m not saying that PlayStation is bad...

TINA: I think Xbox Kinect is good. (School 6 Group 11, age 12/13yrs)

Jake begins by attempting to assert superiority through his product knowledge but is challenged by both the interviewer and Alex, before Tina also joins in with her view. However, later in the discussion when the children are talking about what the government should do for children Jake makes another attempt to assert himself by demonstrating knowledge about brands of consoles and their corporate history:

JAKE: I want SEGA...I want them (the government) to make the company SEGA make another console, because in 1999 they made an awesome console called the Dreamcast and...

ALEX: Apparently they’re making the Dreamcast 2.

JAKE: No they're not. And when the PS2 came along, SEGA said that's it, we're quitting the console business and I do want them to come back, because if they do they'll absolutely thrash the Wii and the 360 and the PS3.

This time Jake refuses to be put down by Alex and we can see how his social performance of loyalty to SEGA and detailed knowledge about its credentials relative to other brands is being used to signal a dominant position in the peer hierarchy. This links with other work which has found that "children may see material goods as markers of status within their peer group" (Banerjee and Dittmar, 2008, p.18). However, rather than interpreting the competence of 'product knowledge' as an independent mechanism for socialization, as Banerjee and Dittmar have done, we see in this exchange how the social practice of consumption comprises a block of interrelated elements: materials (different brands of games consoles) combined with the competence (publicly demonstrating product expertise) that has shared meaning (those who know more about products can assert their superiority over peers and protect their social position).

Social consumption communication

The third competence we observed is what we call 'social consumption communication' as it became apparent that there were tacit rules governing the subtle line between what can and cannot be talked about in relation to consumption. If this was not managed effectively it would lead to a negative perception by peers. In the following discussion Alex describes an occasion when this line is crossed:

ALEX: Because I have a friend who's an only child, and for Christmas he got a laptop, a Blackberry phone...£300 pounds on iTunes and loads more stuff. He announced that all out in college time and everyone was all like 'Shut up!' It's because he didn't shut up he was spoiled (School 6 Group 11, 11/12yrs).

Although previously in the discussion this group had already derided "spoilt" children, the most serious social transgression committed by the friend was the specific way in which he disclosed all the desirable things he had been given for Christmas. The disclosure was quite simply too public, as shown by Alex's use of the verb "announce" and the detail that the context was "college time" – which is presumably when the whole class is together. The use of "everyone" indicates that it was a commonly understood rule that he had broken. Perhaps most telling is Alex's statement that it was "because he didn't shut up, he was spoiled". Receiving desirable objects is acceptable within the structure of children's consumption practice but talking about it too much is not. Those who fail to demonstrate this competence see their social position suffer.

In another group there were lengthy and heated discussions about a girl called Hayley whose mother reportedly gives her “anything she wants”.

ISAAC: I need to say something about Hayley, it’s just...

I: Say one thing and then I want to move on from Hayley, because there’s been a lot about Hayley.

OWEN: No, we’ve got to talk about Hayley, because she’s spoiled.

ISAAC: She is like the only person in this whole school that rubs it in our face and then when we do stuff she goes “What the hell’s that? That’s rubbish!” (School 4 Group 7, 9/10yrs).

Although, as noted by the interviewer, they have spent much of the group time criticising Hayley, Isaac is finally able to sum up why her behaviour is so offensive to their community. Her behaviour transgressed the unwritten rule of social consumption that prohibits bragging. Isaac uses a graphic and physical expression to explain how she “rubs it in our face” and his use of “only” and “whole” underlines quite how deviant her behaviour is from the accepted norm of the social practice. Despite her ample material ownership, Hayley’s lack of competence leads to her rejection by the group.

Conclusion and Discussion

The study provides the first attempt to use a Social Practice Theory perspective to analyse children’s consumption. At a fundamental level, applying Shove *et al.*’s (2012) SPT framework to children’s talk with and about peers enabled us to discover a bounded and consistently linked set of materials, meanings and competences that were evidenced across groups in very different social and geographical settings. This suggests the existence of a stable, shared social reality for UK children of this age. Beyond this we have shown how specific materials that are offered by the market place (technology products, clothes and brands) combine with both the socially sanctioned objective of achieving and maintaining a place in the peer hierarchy and also the three skills we have labelled social consumption recognition, performance and communication in regular, repeated and predictable ways to produce an ordered, patterned and thus reproduce-able nexus of actions (Schatzki, 2002). This suggests that, at least for these diverse groups of UK 8-13 year olds, consumption is indeed a social practice, contrary to Warde’s (2005) view. This allows us an intriguing new view of children’s consumption as a reproductive performance reliant on relatively stable links between specific materials, meanings and competences.

The focus is on “the implicit, tacit or unconscious layer of knowledge which enables a symbolic organisation of reality” (Reckwitz, 2002, p.246). For we have seen that the children do not talk about the practice *per se* but yet it is clearly embedded in their discourse. The practice guides individual agency but the processes therein “do not lie within the realm of discursive consciousness” and thus their practical knowledge is “guided by structural features – rules and resources” (Shove *et al.*, 2012, p.3, citing Giddens, 1984), be it wearing designer clothes to be popular or knowing when to be quiet about your new mobile phone.

Interestingly, the variability of the children’s experiences rather than obfuscating the structure of the social practice actually serves to illuminate it. The different types of ‘social consumption performances’ such as the ostentatious display of gold jewellery and clothes by Abercrombie and Fitch as a signal of popularity or the wearing of ‘casual’ clothes by the ‘friendly’ people actually reinforces the reality of a peer hierarchy with positions at the top, the bottom and in the middle. Reverence, acceptance or rejection by peers was consistently and automatically linked not only with specific but different products but also with their competence or failings around consumption.

SPT also provides an alternative theoretical perspective on children’s consumption that allows new interpretations of the same observed phenomena. For example, the socialization literature presents children’s brand and product knowledge as something acquired by individual children as they mature; something that can be influenced by external forces such as advertising (John, 1999), and it presents peer influence as a force in the creation of materialistic values (Banerjee and Dittmar, 2008). SPT instead shifts the focus away from the child, the social context or even the products, thus ceasing to privilege the notion that consumption is something external to children that they learn to be socialised into; or to consciously use for their own symbolic or other purposes (as in a CCT or ‘uses and gratifications’ approach); or that they have to be protected from (as in some interpretations of the ‘production of consumption’ view).

In particular SPT provides a contrasting view to literature that privileges the role of cognitive competence and implicitly defines ‘successful’ consumption as the gradual mastering by individual children of the sophisticated reasoning skills defined by John (1999) as “advertising and persuasion knowledge” (p.188), ‘transaction knowledge’ (p.192), ‘decision-making skills and abilities’ (p.196); and ‘purchase influence and negotiation strategies’ (p.200). This view has an eye to the future because it seeks to understand how children gradually become reflexive adults who can cope with the external realities of the consumer world. An SPT view instead focuses on the present by seeking to understand the structure of the everyday social reality experienced by children in the here and now.

John's (1999) analysis of children's 'shopping scripts' (a subset of 'transaction knowledge') is a case in point. She relates a study by Karsten (1996) showing that kindergarten children are extremely adept at re-enacting the process of purchasing products in a (pretend) shop.

"Even the youngest subjects in the study understood that one selected their item, checked their money, decided what to purchase and placed it on the cashier's counter, waited for the cashier to check and record the prices and perhaps offer change – they even reminded the interviewer to hand them a pretend receipt." (p.109).

The use of 'even' twice in this short passage implies surprise that such young children are so competent despite what the author would see as a 'lack' of cognitive abilities. Yet from a SPT perspective this finding is unsurprising and serves to demonstrate that children implicitly learn and rehearse social practices from an extremely young age and that the social practice, strengthened through the children's performance of it, exists outside the realities of individual competence.

Implications

SPT'S focus on the *practice* rather than characteristics of children or the role of socialisation agents has a number of implications. Viewed through the discourse of children themselves, it emerges as a complex practice deeply embedded in children's relationships with their family and friends as well as a practice with the potential to be socially divisive. It is thus inextricably linked to their wellbeing.

SPT also allows us to circumvent the vexed value judgement implicit in discourses – in both theory and practice - around whether children are 'vulnerable' or 'savvy' (Cross, 2004; Langer, 2004; DCSF/DCMS, 2009). This value judgement is the lynchpin for the conceptualisation of responsible marketing because the debate on 'fair' marketing has tended to rest on ascertaining an age at which children are sufficiently cognitively competent to understand the intentions of the marketer (Livingstone and Helsper, 2006; Nairn and Fine, 2008). Two responses have commonly been adopted: restricting advertising to younger children (*e.g.* the Norwegian and Swedish ban on advertising to under 12s) or trying to boost cognitive competence through training programmes such as Media Smart (2013) that provide media literacy education to enhance awareness amongst children of all ages of marketing tactics. However, our research implies that powerful elements of children's consumption are largely unthinking and thus unlikely to be affected by initiatives that focus on cognitive capacity. Children's consumption is inextricably bound up with (amongst other things) their automatic judgements about social status and the acceptable behaviour of peers and based on a deeply embedded interrelationship between materials, meanings and competences. Policies seeking to tackle any single element of the practice, such as media literacy training to reduce

the marketing-induced symbolic power of product and brand ‘meanings’ are thus only likely to have limited effectiveness. Instead our research implies that responsible marketing measures by governments and marketers alike need to concentrate on the totality of the practice and particularly on the links between the elements. In some ways this appears a daunting task as it requires a new mindset that involves “taking the focus away from the *actor* and putting it instead on the *actions*.” (Chatterton and Anderson, 2011). Yet the advantages are clear for this new approach could lead to

Avenues for Future Research

Apart from more research replicating this study in other contexts, the notion that individuals are simply “unique crossing points” (Reckwitz, 2002, p.256) for different practices suggests an intriguing new avenue for research on children’s consumption using SPT. Within our own data we were able to see that the social practice of consumption not only encompassed various meanings (*e.g.* products and brands used to strengthen social bonds as well as to signal social position) but that it also overlapped with other practices. Children thus performed different versions of consumption practice depending on other bundled, co-located practices which they carried such as parenting, family communication, sibling interaction, and leisure time practices.

Although space prohibits an exploration of all of these, by way of example, the potential impact of parenting practices on a child’s performance of consumption is illustrated by Anna, who describes differences in technology consumption at home:

I’m allowed to go on the computer when I want, watch TV when I want... [but] Esther, her mum will only let her watch TV for about an hour or something and she has her own computer in her room but apparently she’s not allowed to go on that very much... (UK School 5 Depth 1, 10/11yrs).

Further research is also needed into how marketing and media practices overlap with children’s consumption practice. Marketing provides a constant stream of new materials and new meaning around consumer goods and consequently will provide the requirement for new competences by the children. Indeed as Warde (2005, p.141) notes, “Producers attempt to mould practices in line with their commercial interests”. The potentially changing constituency of the practice may therefore give rise to an ever-tightening link between social position and consumption and provide more opportunities for the children to fail. This may create increased rejection, perceived status inequality and associated psychological suffering when children without the requisite materials or competences fail to consume proficiently enough for peer acceptance. On the other hand responsible marketers have the opportunity to use their communication skills to help shape

practices with more prosocial outcomes. As Martens *et al.* (2004) assert, we must not underestimate “the capacity of the media to impact on which goods and services are ‘best’ for the forging of social bonds and group acceptance... to which children appear susceptible” (p.166).

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ⁱ In UK most children wear school uniforms. Occasionally schools have “non-uniform days” where children can wear what they want.